



University of Groningen

**In termen van fatsoen; sociale controle in het Groningse kleigeboed 1770-1914.**

Sleebe, Vincentius Cornelius

**IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.**

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*

1994

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Sleebe, V. C. (1994). In termen van fatsoen; sociale controle in het Groningse kleigeboed 1770-1914. s.n.

**Copyright**

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Take-down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

# Summary

This study is concerned with the interactions among three systems of social control and the repercussions of these systems upon standards of decency and patterns of behaviour in the northern Groningen clay area between 1770 and 1914. Guideline has been the relation between people's perceptions and expectations about (aspects of) their lives and the actual satisfaction they can find in their way of living.

In the period under study there were numerous groups that had diverging perceptions and satisfactions. These groups were found in a variety of spheres. In the socio-economic sphere, the dominant factor in the northern Groningen countryside was the ever-widening gap between farmers and labourers. In the religious sphere, liberal protestants and strict Calvinists opposed each other.

Central to the book is the concept of social control, i.e. the mechanism by which people's behaviour is guided and corrected by members of the same group or those of other groups. It includes formal as well as informal means of control. The main question put forward here is how various groups and individuals tried to harmonize their perceptions and satisfactions through social control. In answering this question three different systems of social control have been distinguished.

The development of these three systems is the subject of the first part of the book. The first system of social control to be considered, is that of popular culture. The use of the term 'popular culture' is not without danger; it is used here to indicate a system of social control that is largely informal, as it is based upon unwritten rules (codes, values) which are maintained through unofficial procedures.

At the end of the eighteenth century there were several informal mechanisms of social control in the Groningen clay area. Moral standards and values were not only transmitted by gossip, mockery and – more incidentally – charivari or rough music but also through the oral tradition. Even belief in magic and sorcery could function as a means of social control. Finally, there were numerous customs that concerned mutual help and informal poor relief. These regulated relations between employers and employees and between villagers among themselves.

In the course of the nineteenth century northern Groningen society became more and more divided into distinct groups. The polarization between large farmers and their labourers was mainly a result of economic development. The number of farms hardly increased, whereas the population grew enormously. This led to a deterioration in the position of the working class and resulted in growing (seasonal) unemployment and a weakening of social bonds.

This polarization also had political, psychological and cultural aspects. Farmers not only saw their prosperity grow, but their political power as well, and in many places they became the local elite, filling the vacuum left by the former gentry. Moreover, at that time they were also being influenced by the views and ideas of the Enlightenment which were disseminated through cultural and reading societies. These organizations provided the farmers with both intellectual and social prestige.

Apart from polarization in the social sphere, there was polarization in the religious sphere as well. This was caused by the Dutch Reformed Church's liberal ideas and the state's power in church matters. As a result, calvinistic groups whose beliefs were based strongly upon orthodoxy and inner conviction, no longer felt at home in the Reformed Church. Ultimately this led to the 1834 Secession, which, in due course, gained many adherents.

Religious developments strongly defined the kind of social control exercised by the churches. The mechanisms of social control and their impact varied greatly among the the various religious groups. Within the orthodox churches there was a strong revival of early Calvinist discipline. Initially there was a strong tendency to base beliefs upon personal experience, which was why there was a close connection with certain aspects of popular culture. Within these churches the use of mechanisms of social control and elements of popular religion played an important role. 'Superstition' and personal religious experience were strongly related. However, some aspects of popular culture, such as certain forms of entertainment and premarital sex, were strongly criticized. Gradually, the secessionist churches evolved towards orthodoxy, in which obedience to biblical values and a strong organizational structure were considered more important than pietistic experience of God. Ties with popular culture weakened; in due course these Calvinists even became its strongest adversaries.

In the process of pillarization, religious polarization grew more rigid. The leaders of the extreme protestants obtained greater influence on local and national political levels. This became clear in their campaign against certain aspects of popular culture. Unlike before, large parts of the middle and working classes supported this campaign, and as a result popular culture and the system of social control based on it disintegrated still further.

A lot of people that had become disillusioned with the Dutch Reformed Church became members of the secessionists churches. Others, however, gave up on Christianity altogether. These atheists were found mainly among the higher and the lower social classes, and in the eastern part of the region.

Next to popular culture and religion, the authorities constituted the third power with respect to social control. As a result of political processes, there were, between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, major changes in the way in which public life was regulated. From the early nineteenth century onwards centralism characterized national politics. This was reflected in legislation and its effects on a local level. New areas for making rules were claimed and occupied by various authorities. This happened at the expense of the churches and popular culture, which lost a lot of their power of exerting social control. For example, the state took over control in the areas

of education and marriage, and certain elements of social control within popular culture, such as charivari and every-day violence, were made criminal offenses. Tax evasion, poaching and smuggling gave rise to other clashes of interest between the central state and the local population.

On the other hand, the government was sometimes forced to take over in areas in which the other systems of social control had lost their grip. This appears for instance from the introduction of regulations concerning mutual help and poor relief. At the end of the nineteenth century, the authorities were confronted with poverty, unemployment, crime and social unrest. Growing social tensions, partly caused by the weakening of the old mechanisms of social control, evoked stronger social control by the state. In the countryside this led to various repressive measures: first there was the introduction of state police, then the introduction of a military police force.

At the end of the nineteenth century morality became a hot issue in both national and local politics. This was partly caused by the growing power of conservative, mainly Christian, political parties. High moral standards were emphasized and a crusade was waged against such aspects of working-class culture as drinking, popular entertainment, every-day violence, institutionalized begging on New Year's Day and all kinds of festivities.

As a consequence of the above-mentioned developments, informal social control was marginalized. Some of its elements, for instance institutionalized mutual help and informal poor relief, disappeared altogether. Other social mechanisms lost influence because their impact became more and more confined to certain groups within society, without any effect on the population at large. Gossip was still quite common in most groups, but the gossip circles had become more uniform and, probably, smaller than before. Heavy social sanctions, such as the use of charivari, were mainly applied within the lower social classes.

Remnants of earlier popular culture were mixed with survival strategies that were used by the lowest social classes to protect themselves against deteriorating social conditions. These strategies included petty theft and smuggling, as well as expressions of discontent. This resulted in a culture of poverty that among some parts of the population lasted well into the twentieth century. Within other groups, especially among large farmers, other standards of behaviour prevailed. Their group culture was based upon rationality, education, domesticity and 'civilization'. The middle classes took up a position in between the extremes of the farmers on the one hand and the labourers on the other. Gradually they developed a group culture of their own, in which domesticity played a large part, and in which diligence and thrift became important values. In this they opposed both the farmers' conspicuous consumption and the workers' culture of poverty.

In the second part of the book the question is raised in what ways changes in the systems of social control have influenced the development and maintenance of moral standards in the areas of public festivities, leisure activities, mutual relations, and people's private lives. The nineteenth century saw the rise of processes that can be described in such terms as 'increasing decency', 'increasing rationalization' and 'pri-

vativization'. Up to the early nineteenth century, most forms of public entertainment – fairs, festivals and gatherings at inns for instance – were closely linked to socio-economic life. On these occasions business deals were concluded, news was transmitted and future partners were selected. In popular culture, the relations between employers and employees, between merchants and customers, and between neighbours were structured by means of numerous social and cultural events. Emoluments and informal poor relief were mainly administered on festive days. And matters of sexuality and marriage were for a great part dealt with in public, so that the community could exert a strong influence. Public occasions served these social and sexual functions for practically the whole population. In the eighteenth century, attempts by the provincial authorities and the church to improve the standards of cultural and sexual life, had failed.

From the early nineteenth century onwards, however, attempts at civilization were intensified. The church and authorities were highly critical of what they considered to be public excesses. Gradually they received more support from the local elite, the rich farmers, who had come to dislike the conventional forms of popular entertainment and had taken to new, more civilized ways of spending their spare time. Many of them had joined reading and cultural societies, which offered not only intellectual satisfaction but social prestige and status as well.

That the attitudes of the local elite were changing also becomes clear from changes that took place in labour relations. As the farmers began to distinguish themselves intellectually from the lower social classes, they increasingly came to dislike the presence of servants at their tables. This led to the introduction of separate servants' quarters. The farmers also no longer upheld the customs, festivities and poor relief that had once brought at least some pleasure to the lives of both servants and labourers. On their part, though some of them joined the new secessionist churches, most labourers and servants remained connected with certain forms of popular culture and refused to reshape their ways of enjoying themselves. At the end of the nineteenth century this growing resistance led to the rise of a labour movement.

The same process of rationalization can be detected in changes in the social relations between villagers. Activities that, till the end of the eighteenth century, had been undertaken collectively – such as the upkeep of the communal infrastructure; mutual help with respect to birth, illness and death; and informal poor relief – slowly disappeared during the nineteenth century. To a certain extent this was an expression of social and religious polarization that broke down the unity within local society. In vain local authorities tried to stop this process by drawing up rules concerning neighbourly duties and other elements of rural culture they thought worth preserving. However, these same authorities forbade the festivities and forms of informal poor relief, such as begging on New Year's Day, that had till then been an essential part of traditional culture. In this way they themselves contributed to the disintegration process.

All these changes in recreational and social activities were accompanied by a privatization of marriage, sexuality and domestic life in general. Many points of contact between the private household and the community, which had also been application

points for social control, were lost. Moreover, the church and authorities tried to foster the privatization of what were increasingly considered to be private matters. Only the orthodox church still exercised strong control.

Nevertheless, there were only few changes in people's sexual behaviour. For most groups premarital intercourse remained a well-accepted step towards marriage, as is clear from the high incidence of pregnant brides. However, privatization of sexual affairs and diminishing social control led to a steady rise in the number of illegitimate children. Without the appropriate mechanisms of social control, fathers-to-be could no longer be 'shotgunned' into marriage. In addition, and in working-class subculture in particular, a pattern developed of concubinage and marriage postponement.

Gradually a diversification of standards and values concerning sexuality, marriage and domestic life arose. This was foremost a social development. The farmers were the first group to abandon the old customs concerning courtship and marriage. Several middle-class groups, such as teachers, quickly followed suit. Their preoccupation with domesticity, economy and diligence manifested itself mainly in a withdrawal into private life and a casting off of traditional social control where private matters were concerned.

Another matter that is investigated in the present study is the question whether there were, in the past, any clear 'civilizing offensives'. Actually, three such offensives can be distinguished. The first one, launched in the seventeenth century by the Dutch Reformed Church and continuing into the eighteenth, was hardly effective. This was because it was too far removed from the ideas and world of the local population. Besides, the means of social control that would have been needed to make it successful simply were not there at the time. The second offensive took place in the first half of the nineteenth century and continued where the first one had left off. However, it was mainly supported by the rising class of farmers and was in fact aimed at the farmers in the first place. In that respect this second offensive fits nicely into an Eliasian pattern of culture as a status symbol. In as far as the offensive was directed towards the lower classes, it had hardly any success.

The third civilizing offensive, launched in the second half of the nineteenth century, combined the methods used in the first and second offensives. This offensive was more clearly aimed at the lower classes than its predecessor. Moreover, it was more readily accepted by the population as a whole. This third offensive did not impose new standards of behaviour forcefully. It fitted in nicely with certain tendencies that already lived among the population.

The developments in northern Groningen can be described as a process of formalization of social control. The social control system of the authorities greatly gained in momentum after the establishment of the central state. The state-formation process in the first half of the nineteenth century led the state to regulate numerous matters that earlier had lain outside its scope.

Another factor underlying the formalization of social control in the nineteenth cen-

tury can be found in the internal developments in the region. As a consequence of the disappearance of popular culture, the authorities and, to a lesser extent, the churches, were forced to take over in those areas where they thought social control to be necessary. In doing so the authorities did not create new forms of social control from scratch; they formalized and institutionalized existing mechanisms.

Not only can one trace out a process of formalization, but also a process of ongoing fragmentation of social control, a process that had already started before the period under study, and that, in fact, still has not finished today. The outdated stereotype of a uniform and static popular culture does not therefore apply to eighteenth-century Groningen.